After a painfully quiet off-season, the Indians have suddenly gone into high gear with some additions and subtractions as the 40-man roster starts to come into shape and as the Indians start to make some moves on the edges of that roster. Suddenly, the Reservation is more active than it was all off-season and the Tomahawks are in the air to prove it…

_____

Starting from the top, it seems as if Aaron Laffey will be heading to the Emerald City, where he will be re-united with The Atomic Wedgie, Frank the Tank, Chris Gimenez, and The Game Boy as the Mariners attempt to…well, I'm not sure what to make of all of those former Indians in Seattle.

Regardless, Laffey's departure comes as a bit of a surprise as the 40-man roster certainly included more expendable pieces than The Babyfaced Bulldog, particularly considering that Laffey has an option remaining, meaning that the Indians could have spent the season with Laffey getting time in both Cleveland and Columbus, utilizing him in a swingman capacity for both teams at the very least. One would think that Louie V or Trevor Crowe or even Jayson Nix represents a less likely option to contribute in 2011, but with the signing of Durbin, the Indians needed to clear a 40-man spot and they did so in sending Laffey off to Seattle.

Truthfully, Laffey has always held a soft spot in my heart since his performance in the 2007

ALCS and, with his youth and his groundball tendencies, the thought that Laffey would be able to contribute in some role (at least in 2010) has now gone out of the window. Lest you forget, here are the groundball numbers for Laffey, going all the way back to his time on the farm:
2006 (Kinston/Akron) – 62.5 GB%
2007 (Akron/Buffalo) – 62.2 GB%
2007 (Cleveland) – 62.4 GB%
2008 (Buffalo) – 54.4 GB%
2008 (Cleveland) – 51.1 GB%
2009 (Akron/Columbus) – 45.5 GB%
2009 (Cleveland) – 48.9 GB%
2010 (Columbus) – 45.1 GB%
2010 (Cleveland) – 49.3 GB%
While that number dropped precipitously in the last two years, Laffey always seemed to represent at least an average 5th man or a valuable long reliever (particularly with the glut of RH starters) and his remaining option makes this move puzzling.

After spending his first three years mainly in the Indians' rotation (posting an ERA+ of 98, which is essentially league-average, and a higher ERA+ than any Indians' starter not named Fausto posted in 2010), the Indians bounced Laffey around the rotation and the bullpen as well as moving him up and down I-71 until he experienced shoulder issues that derailed his 2010.

Interestingly, Laffey was never really involved in much of the discussion over who would emerge as the Indians' 5th starter and the assumption that he would serve as the long man seems to have been sabotaged by the Durbin signing. That being said, it's not as if Laffey was out of options and the Indians were forced into making this move, which makes him being traded all the more curious. Not curious as in "HOW COULD THEY TRADE AARON LAFFEY" as Laffey is a fungible part who has value, if limited value, but more pointedly as to why the Indians deemed Laffey to be the most expendable member of the 40-man roster.

At first blush, the return for Laffey certainly doesn't look like a compelling reason to make the move as the Tribe receives Matt Lawson (not Matt Lawton), a middle infielder who is 7 months younger than Laffey (that means he's 25 too) and has yet to see time above AA. While Lawson's numbers from 2010 look decent (.811 OPS) while playing for two teams and is reportedly a good defensive 2B, this organization is teeming with upper level 2B and the fact that Lawson was a 24-year-old still in AA certainly colors the view of his performance there.

Interestingly, Lawson was one of the four players that the Mariners received from Texas last year in the…wait for it…Cliff Lee deal and where he fits into the organization (other than off of the 40-man) is questionable as the likelihood of him being promoted to AAA to play 2B is out of the question because of Jason Kipnis and Cord Phelps (not to mention Luis Valbuena) and there's a good possibility that he starts the season in AA again, as a 25-year-old non-prospect.

All told, the 5th starter competition just lost one "competitor" (if you could even consider Laffey in that mix to begin with) as the middle infield depth in the organization now gets impossibly deep, if underwhelming beneath Kipnis and Phelps. Beyond that, Laffey leaves the organization as the pitcher drafted during the Mirabelli regime (2000-2007) with the 2nd highest WAR total

accumulated by an Indian as his 1.6 career WAR falls just behind Jeremy Sowers career WAR of 1.7.

Regardless, Laffey leaves the 40-man and the organization, all while Trevor Crowe inexplicably lives another day on the 40-man roster…

_____

Back to the 5th starter competition, remember that whole "maybe the Indians can wait out Jeremy Bonderman and get him on a Minor-League deal" idea?

Yeah, scratch that as Bondo is reportedly ready to sit out the season because he doesn't really feel up to competing for a rotation spot and, while this certainly raises questions as to how healthy Bonderman is, it would probably close the book on the Bonderman-to-the-Indians talk as the Indians are reportedly holding firm to their "Minor League Deal or Bust" strategy with Bonderman.

In terms of Bonderman's willingness to sit out the season, the tact struck me as a little odd until realizing that Bonderman has made $41,330,000 in MLB, to say nothing of the $1,375,000 signing bonus that he received, having just turned 28 last October.

At this point, Bonderman could probably keep himself in shape and make himself available on the open market further into the season, when most teams don't have the best-laid plans that they do in Spring Training. That way, he can wait until teams get impossibly desperate mid-season and see if he can latch onto a contender who may be looking for a veteran arm and Bonderman represents an upgrade in the minds of some team looking for rotational help for the homestretch and is desperate enough to consider Bonderman for the role.

_____

Speaking of players who found themselves on the outside looking in when Pitchers and Catchers reported, how about this from Phillies' beat writer Todd Zolecki of MLB.com on the newly signed Chad Durbin and why he found himself without a contract at the end of February: *Chad Durbin spoke to Indians reporters today after taking a physical yesterday and signing a one-year, $800,000 deal with a reported $1 million in incentives.*

He certainly wanted a more lucrative deal when he hit the free agent market last year.

The Phillies actually made him an offer in December worth more than $2 million guaranteed, including a buyout for 2012. Although no agreement had been reached, it was believed he eventually would resign. But then the Phillies signed Cliff Lee to a five-year, $120 million contract and everything changed. *The Phillies pulled the offer and said he could come back, but only on a Minor League deal.*

"You know, I'd take Cliff Lee over Chad Durbin," Durbin said today.
Self-deprecation from Durbin aside…that is just a brutal misplay by Durbin and his agent. On one hand, you can't blame them for thinking that Durbin would get in on the riches that were being doled out to comparable relievers, but when that bird in the hand flew away, the

realization that the “two in the bush” simply weren’t there must have been beyond frustrating for Durbin.

As for why he likely overplayed that hand and rejected the Phillies’ initial offer, there is an interesting bit of analysis over at Fangraphs
as Tommy Rancel compares the Durbin signing to the ones that were meted out to similar relievers this off-season:
Far from a relief ace, the right-hander has been a serviceable member of the Philadelphia Phillies bullpen over the past three seasons. His 3.62 ERA over that period was similar to Matt Guerrier and Jesse Crain, whom both received three-year guarantees. Of course, ERA can be misleading, and Durbin’s defensive independent metrics have him much closer to league average than stud reliever, but his 4.58 xFIP was in the neighborhood of Crain (4.46) and Guerrier (4.47). ***This is not to say Durbin should have received the same deals or the contracts handed to the former Minnesota pair were good ones, but an interesting comparison of similar players receiving different levels of dollars.***

That last line (bolded by me) is the one that struck me as what Durbin received is probably more in line with reality and the fact that the Indians are the team with the reliever on the 1-year, $800K deal instead of the 3-year, multimillion guaranteed dollar deal is what should be taken from the whole Durbin signing.

At the end of the Fangraphs piece, Rancel opines that the decision to sign Durbin “is a curious one for a Cleveland ball club that is not expected to compete in 2011” then getting into the whole “they can flip him in July” idea. While the logic of adding Durbin to this incarnation of the Indians can probably be debated in terms of the Indians using 2011 to learn as much as possible about their own players (while I’m admittedly recycling the argument that I used on the Indians’ forum at TCF
), even after with Durbin signing, there is still one spot open in the bullpen, which either Herrmann or Pestano (among others) can fill if they earn that chance in Goodyear.

Lest you think that Durbin is a waste of money, realize that any of the young arms are about $350K “cheaper” than Durbin, and he’s getting paid less than Joe Smith for the Indians to spend a couple of months to find out if he can be a solid bullpen contributor.

What’s relevant about the signing is that (just to use the two guys that were in competition for a final spot in the bullpen), Herrmann and Pestano have 49 combined MLB innings pitched entering their age 27 (Herrmnann) and age 26 (Pestano) seasons. Durbin has thrown more than that in each of the last three seasons for an NL contender, a period in which he’s posted a 3.62 ERA.

Will Durbin flame out, displaying why he’s still available at this point?
Maybe, but if he does, the team can call up whichever arm didn’t make the team out of Goodyear, their growth “stunted” by a solid couple of months by being used regularely in Columbus instead of sparingly in Cleveland.

Ultimately, adding Durbin acknowledges that bullpens are fickle beasts and expecting success

from any reliever (much less those with such limited MLB experience) is a dangerous line to toe, particularly for a young team that needs to build momentum.

Maybe Durbin is terrible, but it costs the Indians less than it did for them to kick the tires on Jamey Wright last year, and “blocks” one reliever from breaking camp with the parent club. On the flip side, maybe Durbin can provide some stability and they can flip him in July after some of the young arms have sorted themselves out in Columbus, with a number of them CERTAIN to come up at some point because of injuries and ineffectiveness that probably won’t even include Durbin.

_____

Not content to shake up their pitching staff with the Durbin signing and the Laffey trade, the Indians added a bit more to their positional depth, by signing Nick Johnson to a Minor-League deal with a club or a mutual option possibly attached to the contract. That added “option” is extremely interesting as Nick Johnson is a known quantity with a proven record to get on base when healthy…but also a known quantity in his inability to stay healthy.

While the immediate reaction of the Johnson deal might have been to equate it to some speculation that the Indians were already readying “Plan B” for LaPorta not being able to get untracked or Hafner’s shoulder continuing to sabotage his career, that speculation certainly feels premature. It feels premature because Johnson recently had surgery on BOTH of his wrists and cannot swing a bat at “game speed”, meaning that he’s more than just a little bit away from looking like a viable option for the parent club.

Which brings it back around to that possible option for 2012 as it’s been noted here before how the Indians lack depth at 1B and at DH (outside of Shelley Duncan or perhaps Jared Goedert) at the upper levels of the Minors, so the addition of Johnson to that mix as insurance against LaPorta’s developmental stall and as Hafner enters the last guaranteed year of his deal in 2012 makes perfect sense for the Tribe. By no means is that to suggest that LaPorta shouldn’t be on the longest of leashes throughout 2011 and that Hafner shouldn’t be playing as much as his shoulder allows, but if 2011 turns into an unmitigated disaster for either, the Indians may have Johnson as a fall-back plan late in the year or (more likely) in 2012.

While it’s more likely that Johnson continues to battle injuries (because quite frankly, that’s his

track record) and that he is a non-factor going forward for the Indians, the Indians took out a lottery ticket that he's able to get healthy and recapture some of the success that he experienced as an OBP machine from 2005 to 2009 (when he posted a cumulative .873 OPS and a 131 OPS+ in those 5 years), whether that comes in 2011 or, with that potential additional option, in 2012.

_____

Off of this wild Indians' player movement carousel and going around these interwebs, there was an interesting piece at B-Pro (subscription required) from RJ Anderso n, analyzing the Indians of the past decade and pointing out some interesting correlations between payroll and winning percentage (and he actually has words of praise for the Tribe in that regard), but Anderson's finish is what caught my eye:
Former general manager Mark Shapiro built successful Cleveland teams behind a few stars surrounded by strong supporting casts. Chris Antonetti's teams appear headed toward a similar template. The Indians already have the star power, and they may have the role players in place as well.
--snip--
Cleveland's potential to fill out the roster with cost-controlled players should allow the team to allocate more of its funds toward locking up its stars—an understated benefit given the Indians' payroll restrictions—much as it did under Shapiro and even John Hart. These things seem to work in cycles, so don't be surprised to see the Indians ascending the AL Central totem pole come 2012.

For a reference point, Anderson pegs Santana, Choo, and Sizemore as possessing the "star power" with the hopes that Asdrubal and perhaps even LaPorta and Brantley start to fill that role as pieces of a "strong supporting cast". As Anderson says, "The rotation lacks an ace, but Carlos Carrasco appears likely to break camp with the team, which should only help" and unquestionably the evolution of that rotation is what bears watching throughout the season and beyond.

While I'm firmly behind the wheel of the Carrasco bandwagon (come on aboard…there's plenty of room), this idea of a supporting cast is interesting as Kevin Goldstein of B-Pro (who ranked t he Indians' Farm System as the 7th best
) had
a recent chat
, during which he noted that the Indians' system as underrated, opining that the Tribe farm system is "not star-studded, but there are tons of future big leaguers there."

"Tons of future big leaguers there" certainly sounds like a pipeline for a supporting cast, but given that Sizemore's final guaranteed season is this year (and if anyone was surprised that he's not going to be ready for Opening Day…well, you haven't been paying attention) and with Choo under control for "only" three more years, that "star power" may be what's lacking going forward. In particular, if you look at the players identified as possessing "star power", he omits all of the Tribe pitchers and, while it simply may take time for the likes of Carrasco and Chris Perez to become known quantities, the need for more of those "stars", particularly in the pitching department, is obvious.

Certainly, some potential "stars" are out there, most notably in Drew Pomeranz (and I see Al White as more of a solid MLB starter…not that there's anything wrong with that, just ask Jake Westbrook) and, more tenuously, Jason Knapp. On the topic of Knapp, Jim Callis of BA had this to say on the "damaged goods" from the Lee dea
l:
No question, if healthy, Knapp could rocket up next year's Top 100. He has a mid-90s fastball and a plus curveball. At the same time, he is still raw, needs more consistency and command, and has to prove he can hold up over a full season. He's just 21 and his career could go in several directions. If everything comes together, he could be a frontline starter. It's also possible that he could be best suited for the bullpen in the long run.

While certainly the "frontline starter" is the path that Indians' fans prefer, the realization is that this year is when a lot of this separation is going to come for these young arms that have entered the system (either via draft of trade) in the last year-and-a-half. While it's folly to label any of these players (Knapp, Hagadone, etc.) as "busts" if they get injured –or struggle, a break-out season by one or more of them in the Minor Leagues that would "rocket" them up these prospect lists certainly would allay some fears and take some of the bite out of the assertion that the Indians are standing at the edge of the desert, preparing themselves for a long, hot walk to nowhere.

_____

Finally in a programming note, I'll be sitting out the upcoming Lazy Sunday as I'll be in scenic Shipshewana, IN at an indoor water park with the in-laws as Shipshewana is the mid-way point between Milwaukee and Cleveland. Coming in to pinch hit for me will be my TCF colleague Al Ciammaichella, who is sure to be swinging for the fences with the likelihood of a HR pretty high…